

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 512

By Hardaway

A RESOLUTION to honor the memories of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, whose deaths ignited the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike.

WHEREAS, on February 1, 1968, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two African-American sanitation workers for the City of Memphis, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning city garbage truck as they tried to escape the pounding rain; and

WHEREAS, this incident epitomized the African-American workers' longstanding grievances; forty percent of the workers qualified for welfare to supplement their poverty-level salaries, and they had almost no healthcare benefits, pensions, or vacations; and

WHEREAS, forced to work in filthy conditions, these employees were called degrading names by their supervisors and arbitrarily sent home without pay for minor infractions that were overlooked when committed by white workers; and

WHEREAS, on February 12, 1968, frustrated by the city's response to the latest event in a long pattern of neglect and abuse of its Black employees—namely, the deaths of Mr. Cole and Mr. Walker—1,300 Black sanitation workers walked off their jobs, demanding that the city recognize their union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) local 1733, and negotiate better safety standards and fair wages; and

WHEREAS, the union, which had been granted a charter by AFSCME in 1964, had attempted a strike in 1966 but failed in large part because workers were unable to arouse the support of Memphis's religious community or middle class; conditions for Black sanitation workers worsened when Henry Loeb became mayor in January 1968, as the mayor refused to take dilapidated trucks out of service or pay overtime when men were forced to work late-night shifts; and

WHEREAS, while garbage piled up during the strike, community support for the strikers grew steadily, and violence against strikers and union supporters increased; however, the city council backed the mayor in steadfastly refusing to recognize the union; and

WHEREAS, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was then invited to Memphis by local labor and religious leaders to reenergize the movement and calm tensions; Dr. King called for a citywide march in a speech that triggered national media attention and catalyzed the rest of the labor movement to expand its support for the strikers; and

WHEREAS, undeterred by local police brutality, Dr. King led 300 sanitation workers and supporters in a peaceful and silent march to City Hall on March 29, 1968, escorted by military vehicles and dozens of Guardsmen; and

WHEREAS, on April 3 in Memphis, Dr. King delivered what would be his last speech, calling on city officials to negotiate a compromise solution to the strike; and

WHEREAS, the next afternoon, as he stood on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel, Dr. King was shot and killed by an escaped convict; and

WHEREAS, on April 8, Mrs. Coretta Scott King and dozens of national figures led a peaceful march through downtown Memphis in tribute to Dr. King and in support of the strike; and

WHEREAS, in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the strike was settled; President Johnson ordered federal troops to Memphis and instructed the Department of Labor to mediate the conflict and settle the strike; and

WHEREAS, on April 16, union leaders and city officials reached an agreement, and the city council passed a resolution recognizing the union; and

WHEREAS, the new contract for sanitation workers included a grievance procedure and staggered wage increases; members of AFSCME local 1733 approved the agreement unanimously and ended their strike; and

WHEREAS, because of the inciting incident of the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker and because of the courage and perseverance of the Memphis sanitation workers, labor conditions were improved, and these African-American men were treated as men for the first time and paid a living wage; and

WHEREAS, the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike ushered in an era of improved working conditions and economic opportunity for African Americans during which our nation moved closer to the goal of equality for all people; this important saga in American history should always be remembered; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memories of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, whose deaths ignited the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike, and reverently reflect on the sacrifices made by so many during the struggle for justice and equality.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy and upon proper request made to the appropriate clerk, the language appearing immediately following the State seal appear without House or Senate designation.